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THE ETHICAL ELEMENT IN WIT AND HUMOR.

BRADLEY GILMAN.

MOST men would rather be called knaves than fools; and most men would prefer to be thought lacking in the color-sense, or the music-sense, to being thought lacking in a perception of wit and humor. The keenness of a man's sense of wit and humor is not to be gauged by the loudness or length of his laugh; for that "outward and visible sign" is largely determined by the character and condition of his nerves. A smile on one man's face may signify as much mirth as a prolonged peal from the lips of another.

Some men and women "see the point" of a joke readily, yet enjoy it less than does their neighbor who has need to have it explained to him; the perception of the comic element in life is quite different from the enjoyment of it; the man who enjoys it is likely to be a man who enjoys many other things also.

In order, however, that every reader's *amour propre* may be given due consideration, the assumption of this article shall be that all who read it have at least a normally keen appreciation of "the comic," whatever its guise, and whether appealing to the mind through the eye or the ear.

For purposes of analysis wit and humor may be considered as essentially one and the same; humor is "the comic" with a flavor of kindness added; wit is "the comic," impersonally presented, or sometimes cutting a cruel path, like a knife-edge, to its goal; one essential element underlies both wit and humor; most "quips and cranks," most jokes and funny stories, may be thrown into either the humor-form or the wit-form, by the addition or subtraction of the kindly element. When Talleyrand said, "Language is given to men to conceal their thought," that is wit; because it is "the comic" pre-

sented impersonally; but the task were easy to build this *bon mot* into a structure of incident, with the proper *dramatis personæ*, and thus make of it a more human and a technically humorous story.

The "average man," the "man on the street," if told that his perception—and in fact, his enjoyment—of wit and humor depends greatly upon his ethical nature, upon his sense of truth and reality, would probably feel, on the instant, mildly complimented; on second thought he might dissent, saying that humorous people often are heartless, and that the habit of seeing the funny side of things tends to make people superficial and unethical. But there is a third and deeper stage of reflection to which this article seeks to lead him.

If this "average man" were asked to explain the nature of wit and humor, very likely he would reply that it rests upon a perception of incongruity; but this is hardly more than a *lucus a non lucendo*. It leaves the problem about where it found it. What does he mean by "the incongruous?" or by "incongruity?"

Thus every witticism, joke, humorous situation or funny story is a statement—by speech or act—which contains two centers, as does an elipse; an ordinary statement of fact has one center, like a circle; but the witty saying or the humorous story has two centers or foci, and one of these is Reality and the other is Falsity; but both of them appeal to the listener or spectator for his approval, his confirmation. In the presence of this dilemma, the mind, the perception, "wanders," as Emerson expresses it in his essay on "The Comic," "from the rule to the crooked lying fact." The more exact statement of this would be that the mind or inward eye wanders from the "crooked lying fact" to the "rule," for it is the "crooked lying fact" which is first and directly given us, and the "rule" we ourselves furnish a moment later.

To illustrate, and condensing the well-known story used by Lincoln, in a political campaign, to lay bare the vacillations of a shifty rival; said Lincoln, "He is like a man,

up in our country, who went out deer-hunting in a dense fog; he saw, dimly, some animal in the distance, but was uncertain whether it was a deer or his neighbor's cow; therefore he fired, cautiously, so as to sort of hit it if it was a deer and miss it if it was a cow." The two centers of this elliptical statement are, first, the implication that a man could so shoot as to accomplish this dual feat; this statement, this center, is the "crooked lying fact" of Emerson. The second center is the affirmation, made by the listener's totality of experiences of projectiles, that a man cannot possibly accomplish such a feat. This second affirmation is "the rule" of Emerson. We promptly apply it to the first plausible statement, overpower that pretender and feel joy in our victory; this joy of conquest is the essence of the pleasure which we always derive from "the comic." It varies with moods and conditions; but, in the last analysis, it is the elemental joy which results from the successful exercise of power. This joy is the "sense of superiority," which the philosopher Hobbes pointed out, in wit and humor; but Hobbes erred in asserting that this superior feeling is exercised by one person over another; it is not; it is the joyful use of reality, by a person, to overpower falsity.

Another illustration—the famous and characteristic story of dreamy, unpractical Shelley, at a time when he was deeply interested in the problem of immortality. One day he met a nursemaid wheeling a very young child in a perambulator; the poet reflected, "Here is a little soul, recently come to earth, out of the great unknown preceding human life; perhaps he can tell me something about the great unknown after human life; the two realms may be one and the same." He accosted the infant, twice; but, of course, gained no response; only a blank infantile stare. "Alas! alas!" commented the disappointed poet, turning away; "how very reticent these little creatures are!" Disregarding the minor accessories of this incident we find the two centers of attention to be these: First, the implication—amounting to an assertion—that

a babe in arms could reveal the great secret if he chose; this is the "crooked lying fact," so-called. Second, the "rule," the absolute truth and reality, derived from our experience of infants, the certain knowledge that they cannot possibly do this thing. With this "rule" we conquer the "lying fact"—which is really not a "fact" but a pretentious implication—and our conquest gives us joy.

Every witticism, or humorous narration, or situation, every appeal of "the comic," through the visual sense or visual fancy, or the aural sense or aural fancy, all these phases of wit and humor can be divested of their minor details, and their two centers, or foci, brought to view; one of these foci is a falsity, an untruth, the other is a fact, a reality, an ethical verity; and the "ethical element in wit and humor" is the conquest of an error, a falsity—usually bolstered into pretentious strength by plausible surroundings—by the truth, as established in the mind of the listener or spectator through past experience. The pleasure which we derive from "seeing" a joke is not unlike the pleasure which Conan Doyle attributes to Sherlock Holmes; it is, indeed, a detective's triumph at unraveling deception and establishing truth.

Nearly all the philosophers before and since the days of Democritus, "the laughing philosopher," have attempted to solve this problem of "the comic." Many of them have frankly confessed their inability to reach a solution. Some have reached and rested upon the half-way word "incongruity." Arthur Schopenhauer penetrated very deeply when he asserted, in sufficiently technical German fashion, "The essence of the ludicrous is in the attempt to subserve a particular case under a general concept where it does not belong." This abstruse statement is no more than Emerson's "crooked lying fact" seeking a shelter under the mantle of "the rule."

We now go one step further, and assert that it is the *attempt* of the pseudo-fact, the *pretense* of the false thing, which arouses the full weight of our intellectual and ethical condemnation, as we crush it with the bulk or

body of truth which we already possess; the mere presence of an article in the wrong place does not arouse in us this ethical element. For example, a misplaced figure in an arithmetical problem, or a slipper in one closet rather than in another, does not arouse it. Those objects have no volition, and could not have willed to misplace themselves or pretend to be rightly placed; only when volition enters, or can be attributed to an object through personification, does the field of unethical conduct open and the possibility of ethical condemnation arise.

For instance, I once came, suddenly, at a lonely spot on the seashore, upon a donkey standing in silence and gazing out over the ocean. At once I smiled; why? Because the place and the attitude of the creature indicated or asserted that he was gazing with tender or exalted sentiment at the wide, watery expanse, as a human being might gaze. That was the falsity, which came first to my mind; and it was promptly conquered by my general knowledge that a quadruped, and especially of that kind, could not feel the emotion which his posture implied. Again, crossing the street of the city I am startled by a loud deep "Honk;" and I leap to the sidewalk, believing I have narrowly escaped death under the wheels of a "forty-horse-power" automobile; but when I turn and look, a grinning, small boy on a bicycle passes me, blowing deep notes of warning on a horn which was indeed made for a large motor car. I, too, laugh; for the deep bass of the horn asserts magnitude, power, peril, but my visual sense assures me of the contrary, and my body of general knowledge crushes the pretentious, mendacious idea aroused by the ominous sound.

It may be urged that the pointing out of this ethical element in wit and humor does not fully explain the mystery of it; that it does not explain the great emotional disturbance which takes place in the mind of the observer or percipient. To which this rejoinder may be made that an essentially comic idea upsets our equilibrium much more at one time than it would at another; at both times

we would "perceive" it, we would "see the point"; but at one time the muscles of our face and throat would react much more vigorously than at the other time. The difference in intensity between these outbursts is largely a difference in the degree of our nerve sensibility; the clever comedian in vaudeville knows well that if he can once arouse our nerves and muscles he can keep them active with only half his previous effort.

Furthermore, in all good story-telling the simple elemental joy of detecting and overpowering a pretentious falsehood by our "body of reality" is vastly augmented by the introduction of the psychological element "expectancy." The skillful *raconteur* arouses the interest of his listener, holds that interest—which can be expressed in terms of nerve-force—in suspense, makes it cumulative, and almost hurls the listener's sympathy and approval and judgment in the direction of the "crooked lying fact." Therefore considerable effort is involved, and a veritable though instantaneous battle is fought, as the listener asserts himself, backed by his experience and knowledge, subdues the pretentious fact, and recovers his ethical equilibrium. For example, many extremely funny stories may be told to us in a condensed form, and cause hardly a smile; but when expanded by a skillful narrator, who stimulates our interest and arouses our nerves by using "expectancy" and "suspense," we are in such a state of emotional tension when the denouement arrives that this nerve-force, long pent up, must find an issue in muscular action usually facial.

The range of our ethical judgment in the field of "the comic" is largely determined by the body of knowledge which we have acquired by our experience of life; if our past experience has never furnished us with the knowledge which is needed to crush the pretensions of some newly asserted fact, we do not crush it, we do not "see the point," and we do not smile. For example, when an American visitor to England refers to the state of Kentucky as "that fertile, prosperous region where the corn

is full of kernels and the colonels are full of corn," he must not be surprised if his jest is received by his English listeners with blank faces; they have not "seen the joke," because they have not the knowledge of American life needed to correct the pretentious and "crooked" fact. The blankness of their faces by no means argues a density of mind; for they laugh heartily over the pages of *Punch*, a publication which most Americans find dull, because they have not the requisite knowledge of British affairs with which to combat and conquer the pretentious fallacies therein offered.

This which I have called the "ethical element in wit and humor" may be illustrated by the physical phenomenon of the leaping spark of an electric battery. As before stated, any simple assertion of indubitable fact is like a circle, and has one center; whereas a witty or humorous assertion is like an ellipse, with its two centers. These two centers now may be likened to the two poles of an electrical battery; the interest of the listener or spectator is led up to the pretentious fallacy and there suddenly left alone, as at one of two electric poles; but it at once leaps, like the spark, to the other stronger pole of established fact; and this discharge of nerve-force overflows along nerve-trunks and branches, finding outlet in muscular actions. Often the mendacious assertion is so plausible, is so intrenched in favoring conditions, that the listener's mind returns, and for an instant again accepts it; and again the electric-like leap of judgment is made, to the pole of undoubted fact, established by experience. Thus are explained the recurrent waves of laughter which follow an especially "good joke;" and an especially "good" joke is one which compels the longest possible leap of the largest possible spark; it is the conquest of the most formidable fallacy which, though formidable, is yet obliged to bow before the still stronger "ethical element" in our perception of wit and humor.

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